

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

Saltworks developers admit they wrongly accused foes of polling residents for a possible tax to restore wetlands

By Bonnie Eslinger
Daily News Staff Writer

Posted: 08/19/2010 03:00:00 AM PDT

Sometimes, mud gets slung a little too fast.

The developers who want to build roughly 12,000 homes on Cargill-owned salt flats in Redwood City issued a statement to the press at 4 p.m. Wednesday accusing one of the project's major opponents -- the Oakland-based environmental group Save the Bay -- of polling local residents to determine whether they'd support some kind of tax increase to pay for further restoration of San Francisco Bay.

"This outside group has repeatedly denied that it would ask Redwood City residents to raise their taxes in order to buy or restore the 1,400-acre Redwood City Industrial Saltworks site," DMB Saltworks General Manager John P. Bruno said in the statement. "Yet right now they are conducting a poll that tests just such a proposal: A tax hike on Redwood City homeowners."

There was one major problem with DMB Associates' statement, however: Save the Bay isn't doing the poll.

A new state agency called the San Francisco Bay

Restoration Authority is doing it, having recently been commissioned to survey residents from Marin to Santa Clara counties.

At 5:11 p.m., the public relations firm for DMB Saltworks retracted the statement, saying that it had "come to their attention that the source of the poll ... was not Save the Bay."

In fact, DMB officials knew the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority planned to conduct a poll, confirmed Jay Reed, director of communications and strategic planning for DMB

Associates. But they didn't know the polling had already begun, so when several Redwood City residents reported they were being surveyed, they jumped to what he called the "logical conclusion" -- that Save the Bay was behind it.

Save the Bay Executive Director David Lewis called DMB's accusatory statement "misleading and desperate."

It was the latest salvo in the contentious battle over the 1,436 bayside acres that Cargill has been harvesting salt from for decades. Cargill and DMB want to develop about 12,000 homes on the property, as well as office buildings, five schools, 20 sports fields and open space. They also would restore about 400 acres to wetlands.

Supporters of the Saltworks project say it would add much needed housing, create hundreds if not thousands of jobs, and provide parks and other public benefits.

Save the Bay has led the opposition, arguing that the entire area should be restored to its natural habitat as wetlands.

Advertisement

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

The poll is trying to gauge area residents' willingness to help pay for Bay restoration through a sales tax increase or parcel tax.

The survey also asks residents whether they have a favorable opinion of a number of government officials and organizations, including county boards of supervisors and city mayors, the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority and Save the Bay. Reed said Save the Bay's mention in the poll contributed to the confusion over who was conducting it.

The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority was created by the state Legislature in 2008 through the passage of AB 2954, championed by Save the Bay and carried by then-Assemblywoman Sally Lieber. The agency is charged with raising and allocating money for restoration of Bay habitat.

Sam Schuchat chairs the restoration authority's seven-member board, which includes representatives from five Bay Area counties, including Redwood City Council Member Rosanne Foust.

According to the authority, more than 36,000 acres of Bay shoreline is now under public ownership and proposed for restoration to tidal wetlands. Restoring the land could cost as much as \$1.43 billion.

Schuchat said the polling and the authority's restoration agenda have nothing to do with the Saltworks project.

"It's not aimed at Redwood City, it's all nine Bay Area counties," he said. "And we can't acquire land. The authority has no role to play and no interest in the

battle that's going on in Redwood City."

E-mail Bonnie Eslinger at beslinger@dailynewsgroup.com.

Advertisement

Print Powered By  PrintDynamics